

Antjie Krog as trendsetter and boundary pusher. Representations of feminine third age in Afrikaans (popular) culture

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A few years ago I wrote an article claiming that Antjie Krog, especially in her collection *Verweerskrif* (published in English as *Body bereft*), revolts against the forced absence of elderly femininity in the society. In her poetic work Krog addresses this invisibility, and therefore makes space in the literary field and the broader socio-cultural discourse for aging women. I consider *Verweerskrif*, with its innovative vocabulary of feminine aging, an important step towards de-tabooisation of (post-) menopausal women in the public space. In this essay I revisit this specific discourse and reflect on how much has changed since 2006 when *Verweerskrif* was published. To illustrate the shift in the visibility of feminine third age in Afrikaans (popular) culture I use the examples of a few recent novels, specifically their covers.

Representations of (feminine) third age in popular culture

As a result of growing percentage of the elderly in the society, there is growing interest in the third age – in specialist scientific journals, but also in self-help books and magazines aiming at the physical and psychological well-being of the senior citizens. However, with the same society being obsessed with beauty and health, old age is at the same time a deep wish – we all want to get old – and a scandal – we do not want to look old (Bruggeman & Smelik, 2011:270-1). When it comes to feminine third age specifically it seems that women lose their femininity together with fertility; an old woman is less of a woman in the public opinion.

Contrary to the opinion that women become invisible with age, in the recent years elderly women have been claiming more and more public space. Nancy Pelosi (80 years old), Speaker of the United

States House of Representatives, is being called the most powerful woman in the US politics. Maxine Waters (81) has been serving as the U.S. Representative for California's 43rd congressional district since 1991. In the field of popular culture, *Grace and Frankie*, played by Lily Tomlin (80) and Jane Fonda (82), have been amusing and endearing millions of viewers with their company manufacturing vibrators for women with arthritis for 6 seasons already since 2015.

Krog's work on feminine third age

In the context of Afrikaans culture the pioneering work of the representation of feminine third age has been done by Antjie Krog. Krog's poetic work was from the very beginning connected to her personal experiences, her lyrical subject growing older together with her (Botha, 2011:1; Francken & Renders, 2005:101; Van Vuuren, 2009:225; Viljoen, 2009:191,201). From her first book *Dogter van Jefta* (1970), published when she was only 18, the body – specifically female body – is a recurring theme in her work that only get stronger and more present with time. Helize van Vuuren states that "the aim to 'revolutionise' the language through transgressing taboos" (Van Vuuren, 2009:218) is a distinctive characteristic of Krog's work.

In correspondence with her own life, Krog's attention shifted to the aging woman and her changing aging body. Even though menopause was mentioned in her earlier work already (Viljoen, 2009:209), in *Verweerskrif* it is foregrounded. Antjie Krog creates a contra-language in her work, her writing offering an alternative vocabulary to describe the unmentionable. Feminine third age in her work deconstructs the dominant discourse about aging women and at the same time comes with a radical alternative discourse.

However, the most radical part, it would seem, was the cover of the book with a photograph by David Goldblatt of a naked female torso from neck to navel. The picture was a personal choice of Krog (Botha, 2011:275) who asked Goldblatt for a picture that would illustrate the essence of aging. The visual impact of the photography is of essential importance for the semantic power of *Verweerskrif* (Nel, 2008). The heated discussion that emerged in South Africa after the book's publication is very much indicative of how big a taboo the aging female body in 2006 still was – visually and linguistically. It is worth mentioning that many of the disapproving reactions came from women – Lina Spies for example called the book "afstotelik" (Spies in Nel, 2008). Another reviewer described *Verweerskrif* as "al die goed wat jy nou oor die jare dink oor jou liggaam, maar nie skryf nie" (Brümmer in Botha, 2011:276). Other reviewers claimed that such topics are not suitable for poetry (Botha, 2011:274). Louise Viljoen argues that "(d)ie heftige diskussies rondom Krog se werk wys dat haar werk die vermoë het om verskillende groepe in die samelewing, vanaf

gewone tot akademiese lesers, te provokeer en te laat nadink oor die skadelike samelewingspatrone wat hulle soms berekend in stand hou of onnadenkend aanvaar” (Viljoen, 2009:221). According to Krog herself the readers were so much triggered because of the recognizability of her poetry: “I can describe my navel in million ways, but it’s only when the aspects of my navel start to overlap with yours that the poem can talk to you” (McGrane in Botha, 2011:280).

Antjie Krog represents in *Verweerskrif* an aging female subjectivity in its full complexity – the body and its processes, the emotions, the interactions (or the lack of them) with family and the society ... Krog fights against the image of a passive elderly “bebril en bebolla” and offers a “positive affirmation of female subjectivity” (Braidotti, 1991:238-9). Krog explained in an interview with Michelle McGrane (2006) that she needed “to grow old in poetry, to describe the sagging seams with affection, to find the words to love someone that I have lived with for thirty years – not as symbols or metaphors, but as blunt, untransformed body” (Botha, 2012). *Verweerskrif* is an appeal for a new vocabulary of (feminine) third age, one that makes it possible to name till now silenced experiences, processes and emotions. The femininity in the third age as represented by Krog is not a faceless, toothless granny but a whole human being – physically, emotionally and sexually.

Recent representations of feminine third age in Afrikaans popular fiction

In 2016 Ilse Salzwedel claimed on LitNet that strong, older women are becoming the norm in Afrikaans popular (romance) fiction: “Vandag se vroue is sterk, slim en dikwels snaaks. Boonop val hulle nie meer soos ryp appels in die wagtende held se arms nie, en is taamlik kieskeurig oor wie uiteindelik hul liefde werd is. Moderne fiksievroue het sterk menings en is nie bang om dit uit te spreek nie. Hulle weet beslis wat hulle uit die lewe wil hê!” In her article Salzwedel uses the examples of Sophia Kapp’s *Oorlewingsgids vir ’n bedonnerde diva* (2016), Santie van der Merwe’s *Vandat jy weg is* (2015), Alta Cloete’s *Opdrag van oorkant* (2015) and Chanette Paul’s *Offerlam* (2015). All mentioned novels indeed do have an older female main character, ranging from forties till seventy – in Cloete’s novel –, and three of them are raising children on their own. While there are of course still novels being published with young female characters, we can see a great diversification of characters in popular (romance) novels in Afrikaans in the second decade of the 21st century, which corresponds with Salzwedel’s example.

For my analysis of representations of feminine third age in Afrikaans in Afrikaans popular fiction, I want to take a closer look at the covers of three novels – Sophia Kapp’s *Oorlewingsgids vir ’n bedonnerde diva* (2016), Alta Cloete’s *Opdrag van oorkant* (2015) and Kristel Loots’ *Foxtrot van die liefde*

(2017). All three books have a (presumably aging) woman on the cover – which makes for great comparison material with previously discussed David Goldblatt’s photography. While Goldblatt was, as instructed by Krog, searching for the essence of aging, on all three covers we see a much less raw and much more curated and beautified representation of feminine third age. The cover of Kapp’s novels shows a black and white picture of a woman of unidentifiable age with shiny red lips. The picture is cut so that only the area from under the nose till upper cleavage is visible, and heavily edited so that there are no visible signs of age on the neck, around the mouth, etc. The cover of Cloete’s novel shows a bust of an older woman with curly grey hair dressed in a flowy loose white garment looking away from the camera. The lines on her forehead, and around the eyes and mouth, are clearly visible. The cover of Loots’ novel shows a full-colour photography of a woman entering the third age. Her loose hair is grey, there are visible lines in her face. Even though dressed up and wearing make-up, her age is not masked. While the cover of *Verweerskrif* seeps anonymity and does not make any attempts to estheticize, that is definitely the case of the three popular novel covers. The greatest difference is the presence or absence of nudity, the sagging breast being probably the most abject aspect of the cover for most critics of Krog’s cover. Nevertheless at least two of the three covers clearly do picture an aging woman.

Conclusion: Performing feminine third age in Afrikaans popular culture anno 2020

Just a few months ago I was holding the *Vrouekeur* issue from February 14 2020 featuring the writer Marita van der Vyver on the cover, sporting short grey hair and an undoubtedly not-young face. The reactions of the broad public were overwhelmingly positive. While there was a lot of talk of Van der Vyver’s “bravery”, no one considered the cover “afstotelik”. While only a decade ago one would consider such a display of mature femininity unpleasant and uncalled for, it is being applauded now. Between the publication of *Verweerskrif* in 2006 and the grey-haired popular writer on a cover of a mainstream women’s magazine in 2020 something has clearly shifted in the Afrikaner community that made the, even though very fashionable and curated, display of aging femininity possible. Suddenly we are experiencing representations of Afrikaans third age femininity that refuse to assume the acceptable positions assigned to them by the (patriarchal) Afrikaner society, or, as Kristel Loots’ Katalaya expresses it: “Sy wil nie met grasie oud word nie. Se gat!” (Loots: 18). That logically makes me wonder whether the cover of *Verweerskrif* would cause so much bustle anno 2020. Tending to answer my own question negatively I want to argue that it was brave, angry women like Krog with their radical abject vocabulary of feminine third age who pushed the boundaries of Afrikaner femininity and therefore made this change possible.

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